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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate some basic power communication factors among American male and female executives in middle and top level management. Variables of primary interest were perceptions of personal power and communication effectiveness within the organization, and some power communication techniques employed by the two genders to establish images of authority and/or influence in professional settings. Five hundred randomly selected top and middle management executives living in the United States were mailed questionnaire. Of the 210 responses, 72 surveys were returned by the United States Postal Service as undeliverable, and 113 executives reported to be retired, deceased, or otherwise ineligible. The resulting return rate, accounting for those subjects designated as ineligible or unreachable, was 70%. The results of this study suggest that male and female administrators perceive differing levels of organizational power, but employ very similar power communication styles and report no significant difference in perceptions of personal communication effectiveness in the organizational settings. Periodic follow up studies similar to this one would be helpful as women and men gain more experience working with one another in an administrative function. (DF)

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SEX AND "POWER COMMUNICATION" IN MIDDLE- AND TOP-LEVEL ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the status of and need for research and educational programs regarding organizational communication, sex and power, particularly programs centering on executive men and women. The purpose of this study was to investigate some basic power and organizational communication factors among American male and female administrators in middle- and top-level management, focusing on perceptions of personal power and communication effectiveness in the organization and on some aspects of the "power communication" styles employed by the two sexes. Based upon the results of a nationwide survey conducted to gather data for this research, I offer recommendations deemed important to the development and application of "power communication" and gender theory (communication theorists in this field of study define "gender" as membership in the masculine or feminine class, as does Kellerman, 1977).

INTRODUCTION

The United States' social upheavals of the 1960s and inflationary trends of the 1970s have affected the 1980s in virtually every phase of American society, generating profound changes in this country's organizational institutions. In light of these changes, social, political, educational, and professional attitudes have undergone a great deal of review over the past two decades. Consequently, such concepts as affirmative action and equal opportunity employment for women have become criteria by which the nation's organizations are being judged and reorganized (Burrow, 1980; Pilotta, 1983; Fitzpatrick, 1983; Vaden & Lynn, 1979; Kay, 1983; Siegerdt, 1982). As aptly stated by Pilotta (1983, p. 1):

> The effects of the women's movement, affirmative action programs, equal employment opportunities, and a general change in societal expectations of women and men have led to women being recognized as having a central place in organizational development. Organizations and women have started out on new ventures, without a clearly defined idea of what to expect.

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This sentiment has been echoed in dozens of studies dealing with gender communication. It has become clear from the existing literature that neither women nor men have been truly prepared for the organizational climate and communication changes which have emerged--particularly at the administrative levels--as the gender mix has shifted in American companies.

Some forward-thinking college and university communication faculties have addressed this concern in their degree programs. Many others seem to focus on the more general study of male/female communication patterns, and still others have foregone gender studies altogether. Social organization trends suggest that this neglect could continue to produce students of both genders who are not prepared fully for the communication interaction patterns encouraged by the new gender mix and power situations they are likely to face when placed in executive positions (Wakefield & Behnke, 1984).

Existing research reports that the two genders have different communication patterns, creating significant obstacles such as bypassing and other basic miscommunication patterns for male and female administrators striving to work effectively together (Baird & Bradley, 1979; Cox, 1976; Crandall, 1975; Terborg & Ilgen, 1975). There has been clear warning that communication differences between the sexes must be researched and understood in relationship to professional situations before the science of organizational communication can effectiely integrate the two genders (Fitzpatrick, 1983; Pilotta, 1983; Siegerdt, 1979 and 1982). It seems likely that this fact will tend increasingly to cause communication concerns as the proportion of women in positions of executive power continues to grow.

Over the past two decades the number of American working women has risen to 50 percent of the country's workforce (Burrow, 1980; Fitzpatrick, 1983; Vaden & Lynn, 1979), and the number of women in middle- and top-level administrative positions has more than doubled in the last five years (Wakefield, 1983). If the emergence of women in executive roles of power continues to grow at this pace, an executive balance reflective of the total numbers of men and women in the U.S. workplace could be reached around the year 2000, establishing an organizational setting necessitating a full "administrative partnership" of equality and cooperation between male and female executives--rather than detente and conflict--if organizational morale, loyalty, and productivity are to be maximized (Wakefield & Behnke, 1984; Fisher, 1980; Knapp, 1984).

The tendencies for training current and future administrators thus far have been to use androgynous approaches combining characteristics socially attributed to men or women, or separate-but-equal approaches assuming little similarity between the two genders (or no approach at all) leading to the types of organizational and/or gender communication programs prevalent today (Siegerdt, 1982; Vaden & Lynn, 1979; Denhardt & Perkins, 1976; Dubin, 1978; Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Rubenstein, 1980). Such approaches often create aspiring females who do not communicate effectively with administrative men, and aspiring males who do not communicate effectively with administrative women. Hence, an atmosphere of competition and conflict rather than cooperation tends to result, along with power plays and lowered productivity and morale levels (Knapp, 1984; Fisher, 1980).

Research since the 1930s has indicated that the organization's everyday life must be understood in terms of informal groupings, beliefs, and norms which necessitate the modification of communication rules to suit different situations (Fitzpatrick, 1983; Blau & Scott, 1962; Thompson, 1967; Licata & Hack, 1980). Therefore, the new gender mix and administrative partnership in middle- and top-level management mean that organizational communication and power theories need to be modified to accomodate the new societal situations organizations are encountering. The overall importance of organizational communication and power studies is capsulized by the Fitzpatrick statement that "influencing people and events is more important in organizations than is understanding them. Indeed, in organizational life, understanding others is only a means to an end. The end is influence" (Fitzpatrick, 1983, p. 84).

There have been gender communication studies dealing with organizational settings, but few have been concerned with administrative positions and the communication of power found therein. Studies which have addressed this particular area have tended to focus upon lower-management positions and have reported findings regarding such communication concerns as stereotyping, sexual discrimination and harrassment, decision-making, language patterns, mentoring, and communication channels (Baird & Bradley, 1979; Burrow, 1980; Pilotta, 1983; Cook, 1979; Radecki & Jennings, 1980). However, they have tended also to be very limited in nature and/or lacking the demographic breakdowns needed for thorough analysis of gender power differences applicable to the higher executive levels. This lack of research devoted to executive gender concerns and their implications for organizational communication and power theory has probably contributed to the misconceptions and misinformation of those in positions to make administrative appointments and to determine training programs for appointees (Siegerdt, 1979; Fitzpatrick, 1983; Barnier, 1982).

A profusion of popular books and articles alleging to address and/or resolve these concerns has stepped into the void, usually presenting the authors' ideas and/or management experiences as facts and rules to which administrators should adhere. These sources rarely include research to support their assertions. Instead, the authors often present themselves as "authorities" simply because they have held executive positions. Such authors are overstepping their legitimate bounds when they assert, without first establishing the data base necessary to support such assertions, that their personal experiences and opinions are universally applicable. Fitzpatrick called such "pop" sources "how tos," with sets of easy communication rules which assume--without supporting data--the same basic conditions for all individuals (regardless of gender, race, age, etc.) and would "best be considered as communication science fiction rather than communication science" (Fitzpatrick, 1983, p. 73).

Though communication authorities seem to agree it is likely that the established theories of administrative power and organizational communication are outdated for the new situations created by

the changing gender ratio, there is currently little more than pilot-type research upon which to build new theories and approaches. Though an abundance of literature concerned with the importance of organizational power exists, studies of effective organizational communication styles would fill a void of in-depth research focused on comparisons and relationships between the two variables--"power communication" (meaning patterns of communication which result in the establishment of dominance status through authority and/or power influence relationships). Particularly, there is a need for power communication investigations related to executive gender differneces and similarities.

Rather than continuing to draw broad conclusions and design administrative communication theory from localized power and communication pilot studies employing small samples, non-administrative subjects, one gender only, and limited demographics, current power-communication data based upon more extensive, representative, nationwide research of men and women holding administrative positions in various types of organizations are required. Communication professors and consultants cannot ethically continue to conduct academic and training programs in this area without the current generalizable data base needed in order to create legitimate theory for such programs.

One specific need is for research studies identifying the characteristic power communication styles of male and female administrators. Some of the information which should prove beneficial might include potential differences and similarities between male and female executives--particularly in middle- and top-level management--in such career related areas as verbal and nonverbal power communication patterns, perceptions of power, mentoring/sponsoring experiences, and communication channels.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of this study was to investigate some basic power communication factors among American male and female executives in middle- and top-level management. Variables of primary interest were perceptions of personal power and communication effectiveness within the organization, and some power-communication techniques employed by the two genders to establish images of authority and/or influence in professional settings.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions were applied for the purpose of the study undertaken and the reporting of research findings:

The administrative partnership is an ideal relationship of equality between male and female executives--supportive of one another's roles and abilities, cooperative, noncompetitive based on gender (Wakefield & Behnke, 1984).

Authority is the right (potential or exercised) to cause directly another to behave in such a way that one gains dominance--legitimately gained, formal, structured in exercise, subject to normative constraints, existent within the role or office--a basic element of power (Starr, 1980).

Influence is the ability (potential or exercised) to indirectly cause another to behave in such a way that one gains dominance--informal, unstructured, based on personal characteristics, existent within the person-to-person relationship--an aspect of power (Starr, 1980).

Power is the "symbolical and generalizable capacity to condition, regulate, and motivate certain choices on the part of others," and reflects relationships of authority and influence and resulting dominance patterns used or exercised only through communication or action (Pilotta, 1983, p. 6; Starr, 1980).

METHOD

Top- and middle-management executives living in the United States were sampled for this study. The list of executives was developed by Ed Burnett Consultants, Inc., of New York City, a company with 25 years of direct mail experience in stratified and randomized list compilation. Burnett's nationwide lists, updated regularly, are composed from telephone directories, trade directories, organization rosters, and special listings, resulting in one of the most complete mailing list sources available in this country.

Middle- and top-level executives whose home addresses were known by Burnett (n=approximately 65,000) were included in the sampling procedure, with a final total of 500 individuals chosen at random. Data were collected from this group by mailed questionnaire. There were 210 responses, 72 surveys returned by the United States Postal Service as undeliverable, and 113 executives reported to be retired, deceased, or otherwise ineligible. The resulting return rate, accounting for those subjects designated as ineligible or unreachable, was 70 percent.

The survey instrument was developed from relevant literature, similar studies, and existing instruments, validated by a panel of experts (Dr. Larry L. Barker, Auburn University; Dr. Michele T. Myers, Trinity University; Dr. Judy C. Pearson, The Ohio State University; Dr. Gail A. Siegerdt, University of Houston), and tested for reliability (external reliability stability coefficient=.993, $p < .005$; internal reliability coefficient alpha=.893, $p < .005$). Starr's study of the communication of administrative authority, influence, and powerlessness via specific verbal and nonverbal communications with others formed the basis for the power communication items on the instrument.

Analysis of variance procedures were applied for interpretation of questionnaire data. Significant differences between male and female administrators ($p<.0001$) were found for perception of personal power in the organization and for the power communication aspect of terminology used to refer to subordinates ($p<.01$). No significant differences were revealed between male and female administrators' perceptions of personal communication effectiveness in the organization, or for the power communication aspects of office decor, method of setting office behavior codes, approach to business agreements, preferred operating style, preferred communication approach, communication with business contacts, seated kinesic communication style, preferred eye communication style, and normal attire for work.

CONCLUSIONS

This nationwide study reveals that both male and female executives in middle- and top-level administrative positions feel they are "usually effective" in their organizational communication styles. However, perceptions of personal power within the organization differ significantly between the gender groups, with the women reporting low-to-moderate power and the men reporting moderate-to-high power.

Since perception of personal power within the organization has been closely related to perception of personal communication effectiveness within the organization ($r=.1746$; $p=.005$) (Wakefield, 1983, pp. 82-83), the findings of this study suggest support for previous research indicating that male administrators tend to overestimate their own worth to the organization whereas female administrators tend to underestimate theirs (Deaux, 1983; "Management . . .," 1979). Another logical explanation for the discrepency is the fact that women tend to be younger, hold lower administrative positions, and have less tenure than do men (Wakefield, 1983).

Though the men perceive themselves to have more power than the women perceive themselves to have, male and female administrators do not report use of differing "power communication" styles regarding the established power indicators employed in this study. This finding contradicts previous research results of significant differences in the communication styles of men and women in business, which have frequently been assumed also to be differences between men and women in administration. There are several possible explanations: (1) societal changes over the past few years may have spurred adapted power communication styles for the two genders; (2) previous research tended to focus on nonadministrative women and lower-level female managers, often comparing them to middle- and top-level male managers; (3) earlier studies tended to employ small localized populations which could not be considered representative of American executives as a whole; (4) larger studies often failed to provide the demographic data necessary to discern whether participants were in administrative or line positions, so <u>all</u> men and women in organizations were compared on an equal basis, regardless of position held.

Administrative women and men indicate a strong preference for a power-communication style employing personal influence with occasional touches of authority (with determination of authority, influence, and powerlessness in item responses based upon Starr's 1980 study, from which the items were directly designed). The only significant difference in their styles concerns terminology used when referring to their subordinates. Female administrators prefer (in order of preference) the terms "the crew" and "my team" (blend of powerlessness and influence) and male administrators clearly prefer the term "my team" (influence).

Both genders report decorating their offices with items of personal significance and a few awards and certificates (blend of authority and influence), setting office codes of behavior by use of a printed employee's manual and by personal example (blend of authority and influence), preferring to work on the basis of a handshake in business agreements (influence), operating in an informal and personalized style using person-to-person communication with co-workers and business contacts (influence), employing a seated kinesic communication style of leaning forward in business discussions (influence), establishing direct eye contact with others (influence), and wearing fashionable attire which is suited to the work situation--usually solid-colored, dark, conservative clothing (blend of authority and influence).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that male and female administrators perceive differing level of organizational power, but employ very similar power communication styles, and report no significant difference in perceptions of personal communication effectiveness in the organizational settings. Reported differences in power need further attention and analysis to determine whether they are real or imagined. Reasons need to be identified if the organizational power differences are real, and perceptions need to be corrected if they are imagined.

The administrative partnership approach is supported since the gender groups in this study revealed very similar power communication styles, providing a strong starting point for encouraging cooperation (rather than competitive) attitudes between men and women in administration. Since there is no perceptible difference in educational backgrounds for male and female executives in this country, the two differences which did surface between gender groups in this investigation may be due to varying socialization patterns for which compensation has not been made in the formal educational process. This would lend credence to the Wakefield and Behnke (1984) recommendation for specialized training "incorporating such elements as . . . a discussion and analysis of relevant gender studies, (b) joint communication training of male and female administrators, (c) experiential exercises such as role playing and role reversal, (d) consciousness-raising regarding the need for attitudes conducive to the administrative partnership.

Periodic follow-up studies similar to this one would be helpful. Similarities and differences may continue to shift as the gender mix continues to normalize, and as women and men gain more experience working with one another in administrative functions. Naturally, related organizational communication thoery will need to be adapted according to whatever changes may develop.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, based upon the results of this study, are offered as important to the further development of organizational communication theory:

1. Encouragement of attitudes conducive to the "administrative partnership," with emphasis on shared gender traits such as nonverbal power communication style (rather than emphasis on points of departure which encourage conflict).

2. Joint education of the genders provided for current and aspiring administrators through training and academic programs incorporating power communication data.

3. Discouragement of focuses on ungeneralizable data in academic and training programs, using such information only with inclusion of proper disclaimers and thorough explanations of the limitations of such studies.

4. Further research concerned with administrative gender similarities and differences, focusing on techniques for helping executive men and women work effectively together. Such efforts are essential to ethical training and instructional practices regarding organizational gender communication theory.

5. Future study of possible reasons for perceived power differences between the two genders, especially in relationship to the fact that there are no perceived differences in nonverbal power-communication styles or organizational communication effectiveness revealed in this study.

6. Further development of power-communication theory based on extensive, generalizable research studies.

7. Consideration of more power-communication variables in future administrative gender research, particularly in view of this study's showing significant difference only for the power-communication item related to verbal communication. Since verbal communication is a highly trainable skill area, such research could supply a strong basis for academic and organizational training programs concerning verbal skills.

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